

45. Yabem

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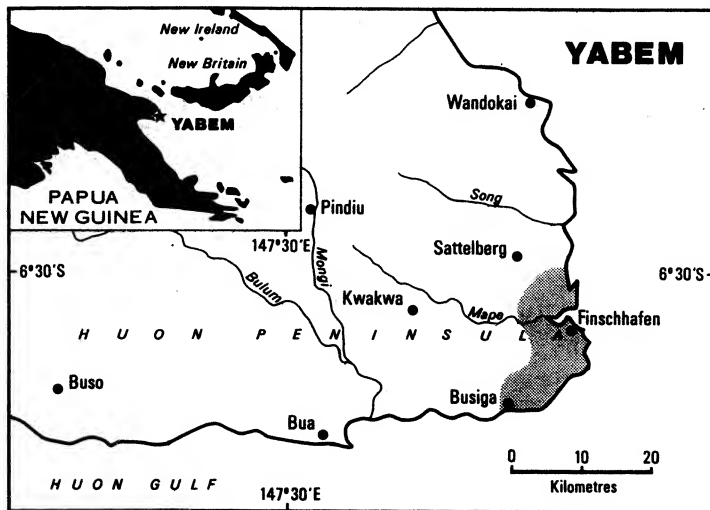
1. Introduction

When the first German Lutheran missionaries to New Guinea, sent by the Neuendettelsau Mission, started work at Simbang in 1886, they found themselves in the centre of the Yabem language area. Yabem was then spoken by just nine hundred people living in coastal villages on the Huon Peninsula of Papua New Guinea from Kamlawa, just north of the present-day township of Finschhafen, to Kasanga, about thirty kilometres to the south (Renck 1977). However, because Yabem was the language of the first converts, it was also the language of the first local evangelists and the language that the missionaries first reduced to writing. As a result, it was carried wherever the Neuendettelsau Mission worked among Austronesian speakers in what is now the Morobe Province of Papua New Guinea, so that by the time the missionary Heinrich Zahn wrote the foreword to his Yabem textbook in 1939, the language had acquired about 15,000 speakers and was understood as a mission *lingua franca* by as many as one hundred thousand (Zahn 1940: v).

The mission laid considerable stress on vernacular literacy and established an extensive vernacular education system whose schools used either Yabem or Kâte.¹ During the ten years after the Second World War, some 30,000 students received Yabem-medium instruction (Streicher 1982: v). The number of speakers of Yabem thus continued to grow until the late 1950s, when in the wake of the Australian Administration's policy banning vernacular schooling in favour of English, many of the schools assumed a much reduced role or were closed (Osmers 1981). Renck (1977) estimated that there were still about 25,000 Yabem speakers, a figure which implies that at its height in the late 1940s and early 1950s the number of speakers was even higher. Today this number is receding rapidly, as the younger

1. Kâte is a non-Austronesian language spoken inland from Finschhafen and used as the mission *lingua franca* with speakers of non-Austronesian languages.

generation is acquiring Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin, the *lingua franca* of much of Papua New Guinea), rather than Yabem, as the language of inter-tribal communication.



Map 45. Yabem language area

As a result of this recent history, Yabem is among the best documented Austronesian languages of Melanesia. Otto Dempwolff, the founder of modern Austronesian linguistics, published texts taken from letters written in 1901 and 1902 by and to plantation workers living away from their home villages (Dempwolff 1905). Pilhofer (1963: 67) reports that until 1914 there was considerable puzzlement among missionaries that a single Yabem word could apparently have so many meanings. It was Dempwolff, at that time still a medical officer with the German Army in New Guinea, who pointed out to Zahn that what seemed to be one word was in fact often several, distinguished by vowel contrasts which escaped the European ear and by a contrast between high and low tone (Zahn, foreword to Dempwolff 1939).¹ After the First World War, Dempwolff was appointed Professor at the University of Hamburg, and continuing collaboration with Zahn resulted in Dempwolff's Yabem grammar (1939) and Zahn's Yabem teaching text

1. Interestingly, the texts in Dempwolff (1905) lack the contrast between high and mid-high vowels, show no awareness of tone, and also omit the glottal stop.

(1940).¹ Zahn meanwhile had produced a mimeoed Yabem–German dictionary as early as 1917, which his colleague Johannes Streicher revised many years later (after the latter's retirement) and expanded as Streicher (1982). A large quantity of material, including the New Testament, has been published in Yabem, and a list of the more important items is given by Streicher (1982: 657–658). The availability of printed material has led other linguists to work on the analysis of Yabem, resulting in Bradshaw (1980), Bisang (1986) and Grüninger (1986).

There is no significant dialect variation in modern Yabem (i.e. within the villages to which it is native), but this may well be a result of standardisation which has occurred because Yabem has become a *lingua franca* and a written language. At the same time, there is no evidence that radical changes have occurred in the language since 1886. Although the language of the word list is standardised Yabem, it is (apart from the obvious modern borrowings) probably also a fair reflection of the language of a century ago.

Yabem is one of the three member languages of the North Huon Gulf chain, itself part of the Huon Gulf family (Ross 1988: 132–133) which also includes the languages of the Markham Valley (see Adzera, in this volume) and of the region to the south of the valley (see Buang, in this volume). The three languages of the North Huon Gulf chain, Yabem, Bukawa and Kela, share a set of changes which have resulted in phonological attrition, loss of some former consonant contrasts, a tendency toward monosyllabism, and the development of tone² (Ross 1988: 148–152). They are thus phonologically quite unlike most Oceanic Austronesian languages, including their neighbours in the Morobe Province, and Yabem was really quite unsuitable for use as a *lingua franca*, as Dempwolff (n.d.)³ pointed out. However, precisely because the first groups to be evangelised by Yabem speakers were the Kela and the Bukawa, for whom Yabem was easy to learn, a beachhead

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1. Dempwolff's grammar is a remarkably insightful description of an "exotic" language, prefiguring the "notional" and "functional" approaches to language description of the 1970s and 1980s, a fact to which Bradshaw (1980) pays tribute.
 2. It is not clear whether tone occurs in present-day Kela, but it is reconstructible in its immediate ancestor.
 3. Dempwolff (n.d.) is an analysis of the Adzera language of the Markham Valley which concludes with a comparison of the features of German, Yabem, Kâte, and Adzera and the degree to which they lend themselves to use as a *lingua franca*. The manuscript was apparently written around 1928 (Susanne Holzkecht, pers. comm.) at a time when there was controversy in the mission as to whether Adzera should assume a role as a *lingua franca* (Osmers 1981: 88). Dempwolff came down strongly on the side of Adzera, but was ignored by the missionaries, and Yabem was finally introduced among Adzera-speakers in 1937 (Pillhofer 1963: 170).

was established for Yabem as a *lingua franca* before a group speaking a more distantly related Austronesian language attempted – with difficulty – to learn it (Pilhofer 1961: 139-140, 151).

The fact that Yabem and Bukawa are tone languages has evoked considerable interest in the literature, not only in the works referred to above but also in Capell (1949). The genesis of tone in the North Huon Gulf languages has been reconstructed by Bradshaw (1979) and Ross (1988: 149, 418-419), and a brief description of tone in present-day Yabem is given below.

More recent borrowings into Yabem are footnoted in the word list, and are from two major sources. The first is German, which was spoken by missionaries and government officials during the German administration of New Guinea. The other is English, which supplanted German as the language of administration after 1918. There are many items footnoted as English borrowings which were probably borrowed via Tok Pisin, but their phonological restructuring in Yabem makes it impossible to be sure of the source. One word, *bulimakao* ‘cattle’, is footnoted as a Tok Pisin borrowing, as it is not a modern English word: however, even here the source is uncertain, as ‘bull-ma-cow’ was current in nineteenth-century English jargon in the Pacific. Yabem *medesiq* ‘medicine’, on the other hand, is almost certainly not a borrowing from Tok Pisin, which has the form *marasin*. There are also a number of cases, for example Yabem *golodo* ‘gold’, where we cannot be certain whether the source was German *Gold* or English *gold*.

A third source of borrowings is Malay, which had some currency from about 1885 to 1895 on the plantations established by the German New Guinea Company because labour was imported from Indonesia. The first of these plantations was established in 1885 at Finschhafen, that is, within the area where Yabem was spoken natively.